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ABSTRACT

Theories of human motivation have focused on the distinction between task-involvement (a concern with task mastery) and ego-involvement (a concern over evaluating performance relative to normative or other external criteria). Nicholls (1984) has proposed that competence is construed differently under task-involving and ego-involving conditions. This view suggests that task-involvement and ego-involvement will affect the relative salience of effort and ability as explanations for performance on novel skills tasks. To further explore this issue, a study was conducted which compared attributions of college students performing a novel skills task with and without implied evaluative standards. Subjects (N=137) in three conditions completed a nunmber-detection task. In one condition high precision was emphasized, in a second condition high output was emphasized, and in a third condition no performance standard was implied. After completing the task, subjects rated their performance and the extent to which their performance reflected their effort and ability. The results indicated that implied performance standards increased a subject's attributing his/her performance to ability relative to effort; ego-involvement appeared to increase concern over one's ability. This was particularly evident among subjects who perceived themselves as performing poorly. These findings are consistent with Nicholls' model. (NB)

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The Effects of Evaluative Standards on Attributions of Effort and Ability

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Abstract

A number-detection task was completed by 137 subjects. In one condition high precision was emphasized, in a second condition high output was emphasized, and in a third condition no performance standard was implied. The results indicated that implied performance standards increase attributing performance to ability relative to effort. This was particulary evident among those who perceived themselves as performing poorly.

The Effects of Evaluative Standards on Attributions of Effort and Ability

Recent theories of human motivation have focused on the distinction between task-involvement and ego-involvement (DeCharms, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Nicholls, 1984). Task-involvement reflects a concern with task mastery while ego-involvement reflects a concern over evaluating performance relative to normative or other external criteria. When external evaluative standards are salient, attention is focused on meeting the criterion and self-evaluations are made in relation to meeting the criterion (Deci, Spiegal, Ryan, Koestner, & Kauffman, 1982). Moreover, evaluative standards act to reduce intrinsic motivation (Mossholder, 1980; Ryan, Mims, & Koestner, 1983).

Nicholls (1984) has proposed that competence is construed differently under task-involving and ego-involving conditions. According to this model, under task-involvement competence is construed in terms of mastery through effort. Under ego-involvement, on the other hand, competence is construed in terms of the capacity to meet or surpass normative or external criteria given optimum effort.

The Nicholls (1984) model suggests that task-involvement and ego-involvement will affect the relative salience of effort and ability as explanations for performance on novel skills tasks. Under task-involvement, when no performance standard is implied, attention should be directed toward mastery. Thus, effort is

likely to be salient and actors would be more likely to attribute their performance to effort than to ability. When evaluative performance standards are introduced, attention is likely to be focused on meeting the implied standards. Under these circumstances, concerns about relative competence are likely to be salient (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Nicholls, 1984) and actors should be more likely to attribute their performance to ability than when under task-involving conditions.

In this experiment attributions of individuals performing a novel skills task with and without implied evaluative standards were compared. Moreover, as the task allowed for comparison along qualitative and quantitative performance dimensions, evaluative standards regarding each dimension were employed.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 137 undergraduates enrolled in introductory psychology courses. Participation was voluntary.

Procedure

The subjects were presented with a number-detection task which was indicated to address the types of skills required for proof-readers. An "X" had to be marked through every third 7 and a line drawn under every second 6 occurring in each line of random numbers. In one implied evaluative standard condition the proofreading job was described as requiring high output and in the other implied evaluative standard condition the job was described as requiring high precision. In the third condition there was no implied evaluative standard stated. The task was administered in group sessions of varying size. Each group was randomly assigned to one of the three conditions.

Results

The number of lines attempted, the average number of errors per line, and the subjects' ratings of their performance were obtained. No significant differences among the conditions were found on any of these performance measures, $Fs < 1$.

Subjects rated the extent to which their performance relfected their effort and ability. These ratings were analyzed in a 3(Implied Evaluative Standard) X 2(Attribution Dimension) ANOVA. Performance was rated as reflecting effort more than ability, $F(1, 134) = 34.94$, $p < .001$. The Implied Evaluative Standard X Attribution Dimension interaction was significant, $F(2, 134) = 5.94$, $p < .05$. Analysis of the differences in attributing performance to effort or ability indicated that subjects were less likely to perceive their performance as reflecting ability than effort where no evaluative standard was implied than when either precision, $F(1, 134) = 4.23$, $p < .05$, or output, $F(1, 134) = 9.14$, $p < .01$, were emphasized.

A supplemental analysis of the ability attributions was conducted to investigate how these attributions were affected by perceived performance. Subjects were divided on the basis of their ratings of perceived performance. Among subjects who rated their performance above the median, there were no significant differences between those who were or were not exposed to evaluative standards regarding the extent to which their performance reflected their ability. Among those who rated their performance below the median,

subjects who were not exposed to evaluative standards were less likely to indicate their performance reflected their ability than were those who were exposed to the qualitative standard, $t(131) = 3.67$, $p < .01$, or the quantitative standard, $t(131) = 3.80$, $p < .01$.

Interpretation

The results of this study are consistent with Nicholls' (1984) model which holds that competence is construed differently under task-involving and ego-involving conditions. Ego-involvement appears to increase concern over one's ability and would be problematic for those who feel they can not meet imposed standards. This suggests that actors' confidence in their ability to meet standards may be a mediator of the undermining effect of ego-involvement on subsequent motivation and performance.

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Table 1

Means for Performance and Attribution Measures

Measure	Implied Standard		
	Precision (n = 52)	Unstated (n = 45)	Output (n = 40)
Lines Attempted	10.79	10.96	10.53
Errors Per Line	0.57	0.76	0.78
Perceived Performance[a]	5.94	5.93	6.13
Performance Reflects Effort[a]	6.42	6.69	6.38
Performance Reflects Ability[a]	5.62	5.07	5.95

[a]Ratings were done on a 9-point scale with 1 = Very Poorly and 9 = Very Well.

Table 2

Means for Ability Attributions as a Function of Perceived Performance

	Implied Standard		
Perceived Performance	Precision	Unstated	Output
High	6.03	6.50	6.41
	(n = 32)	(n = 24)	(n = 27)
Low	4.95	3.43	5.00
	(n = 20)	(n = 21)	(n = 13)